



In Iowa's Interest:

Schools Must Prepare Students for 21st Century Jobs

by Senator Tom Harkin

Most Iowans would be shocked to hear the rate at which American students are falling behind their peers internationally. Recent studies rank American 15-year-olds 24th in the world in terms of math achievement. Since 1975, we've fallen from 3rd to 15th place in the world in turning out scientists and engineers, careers that are ever more important in today's economy. And another shocking fact: Canadian 15-year-olds, on average, are more than one full school year ahead of American 15-year-olds. These are trends we must reverse.

Over the decades, I have worked hard to increase funding for public education and to integrate students with disabilities into our classrooms. In my new role as chair of the Senate's education committee, one of my top priorities this year is to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The last reauthorization passed in 2001 as the No Child Left Behind Act.

Overall, our goal must be to ensure that all children and youth have the skills and resources needed to be happy, healthy and productive members of our society. Today, more than ever, a world-class education is essential to success and we must act swiftly to ensure that all students have access to a 21st century education. We have to reform the accountability structure of No Child Left Behind while continuing to shine a bright light on the success of all students, especially those with special needs. We should give teachers credit for student growth and reward schools for significantly improving student achievement. We must ensure that our students have great teachers and academic leaders, and those teachers, principals and superintendents have the support they need to do their jobs with excellence.

While working to improve ESEA, we must safeguard the rights of students with disabilities and ensure that they have every opportunity to succeed academically. We must make sure we are focusing on all the needs of America's students, including their need for good health, nutrition and physical fitness. And we need to ensure that the policies we write into the law are flexible enough to meet the unique needs of different students and schools, including rural schools, but consistent enough to ensure high standards for all students.

This past weekend I traveled across Iowa hosting a series of education roundtables that focused on the future of K-12 education policies. The meetings provided local education leaders, parents, students, businesses and community leaders with a chance to share ideas for a revised ESEA. And I was extremely honored that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan joined me in Cedar Rapids and Des Moines. I felt it was appropriate to begin this discussion in Iowa – a state respected nationwide for the quality of its public schools and teachers – and the insight I gained was very useful.

To continue this weekend's conversation, my office created a special email address eseacomment@harkin.senate.gov where Iowans can submit thoughts on existing policy and ideas for how we can improve the law.

Working together, I believe we can shape legislation that makes our schools in Iowa – and across the country – the best in the world and provides the resources to prepare our students to be truly successful in the 21st century.